



News Release

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State Concludes Study on Prescription Drug Deaths

Researchers find common characteristics in many drug-related deaths

(Salt Lake City, UT) - Results of a new Utah Department of Health (UDOH) study may shed some light on the underlying causes of the state's prescription drug overdose epidemic. According to the Office of the Medical Examiner, between October 26, 2008 and October 25, 2009, 432 Utahns died from drug-related deaths. Researchers interviewed family members and friends of 385 of those individuals to look for factors that may predispose someone using a prescription pain medication to have a fatal overdose.

The majority of drug overdose deaths (240) that occurred during the time frame of the study involved prescription opioids and no illicit drugs. Of these deaths, oxycodone was the drug most frequently mentioned as a contributing cause of death, followed by methadone, hydrocodone, and the anti-anxiety drug alprazolam. Males accounted for 51 percent of the victims, and 78 percent of the victims were between the ages of 25 and 54.

"Very little is known about why we are experiencing this epidemic of prescription drug deaths in Utah," said UDOH Executive Director Dr. David Sundwall. "The ultimate goal is to prevent as many of these deaths as we can. Thanks to the willingness of family and friends of these victims to speak about their deaths, we can hopefully prevent somebody else from suffering a similar fate."

Researchers found three characteristics that appear to be strongly correlated with deaths that involved prescription opioids with no illicit drugs: Financial struggles, a past history of substance abuse and mental illness.

- 63 percent were unemployed during the final two months of life
- 40 percent experienced a substance abuse problem during the two months prior to death

- Respondents mentioned high rates of marijuana (48 percent), cocaine (25 percent), methamphetamine (23 percent) and heroin (17 percent) use
- 49 percent had been diagnosed with a mental illness by a healthcare provider

Other key findings from the interviews include:

- 92 percent of decedents suffered from chronic or ongoing pain
- 50 percent used tobacco daily during the last two months of life
- 87 percent had used alcohol
- 66 percent were overweight or obese
- 28 percent had no healthcare coverage at the time of death
- 74 percent had used medications to help them sleep
- 76 percent of those interviewed said they were concerned with the decedent's use of medications

“These are all characteristics that merit further study to determine what role, if any, they play in predisposing a person to an overdose death,” said Erin Johnson of the UDOH Prescription Pain Medication Project. “If further research is able to determine that any of these characteristics do, in fact, make someone more likely to fatally overdose on prescription drugs, the doctors can screen patients for those behaviors and adjust their clinical treatment accordingly.”

Authors of the report also believe many deaths could be avoided if medications were taken specifically as prescribed by a doctor.

The UDOH conducted the study along with support from the Utah Department of Human Services, Weber Human Services, Salt Lake County Division of Substance Abuse, Davis Behavioral Health, Utah County Division of Substance Abuse and Valley Mental Health-Tooele Office. The full report is available online at www.health.utah.gov/prescription. For more information, resources and statistics on prescription pain medications, visit www.UseOnlyAsDirected.org.

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